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FOOD FOR SCHOOLING IN BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh has led the world in creating innovative development programs that can be replicated successfully in other developing countries. The renowned Grameen Bank, which lends small sums to poor women to start up their own businesses, is a notable example. Bangladesh has also implemented the first-ever Food for Schooling program, which may soon be added to the list of successful anti-poverty interventions.

Despite Bangladesh's innovative programs, pervasive poverty and undernutrition persist. About half of the country's 130 million people cannot afford an adequate diet. Within poor households, preschool-age children and pregnant and lactating women face the most acute nutritional risk. More than half of all children in Bangladesh under five are underweight for their age. About one-fifth die before their fifth birthday. Two-thirds of these deaths are related to malnutrition.

Poverty has kept generations of Bangladeshi families from sending their children to school, and without education, their children's future will be a distressing echo of their own destitution. Furthermore, from birth, children from poor families are often deprived of the basic nutritional building blocks that they need in order to learn easily. Consequently, the pathway out of poverty is constricted for children from poor families.

HISTORY OF IFPRI'S WORK IN FOOD FOR SCHOOLING

In 1991, at the request of the government of Bangladesh, IFPRI conducted a comprehensive study of a targeted national food subsidy program known as Rural Rationing. The study found that the government was providing subsidies of $60 million per year to run the program, but about 70 percent of the subsidized food was going to those who were not poor. These findings motivated the government to eliminate the program.

Following the abolition of Rural Rationing, the government commissioned a working group, chaired by IFPRI, to review the options for developing food programs that would reach the neediest people. In 1993, drawing on suggestions from the review, the government launched a large-scale pilot test of the innovative Food for Education program (now called Food for Schooling).

Many children from poor families in Bangladesh do not attend school either because their families cannot afford expenses such as books or supplies, or because the children contribute to their family's livelihood and cannot be spared. Under the Food for Schooling (FFS) program, a free monthly ration of foodgrains becomes an income entitlement enabling a child from a poor family to go to school. The family can consume the grain, thus reducing its food budget, or it can sell the grain and use the cash to meet other expenses.

CURRENT STRUCTURE OF FOOD FOR SCHOOLING IN BANGLADESH

By 2000, the FFS program covered 17,811 public and private primary schools, accounting for about 27 percent of all primary schools in Bangladesh. Out of 5.2 million students enrolled in schools with FFS programs, about 40 percent. (2.1 million students) receive foodgrains through FFS. About 2 million families benefit from FFS. In total, the FFS program distributes about 24,000 metric tons of grain (mostly wheat) per month. Each household is entitled to receive either 15 or 20 kilograms of grain per month, depending on the number of children attending primary school. Households with primary-school-age children become eligible for FFS rations if they meet at least one of four targeting criteria. To maintain their eligibility, children must attend 85 percent of classes each month. The program costs $0.10 per student per day, totaling $77 million in 2000.

CRITERIA FOR BENEFICIARY HOUSEHOLDS

To qualify for the Food for Schooling program, households must meet one of the following criteria:

1. The household is landless or near landless, owning less than half an acre of land.
2. The household head is a day laborer.
3. The household head is female (widowed, separated, divorced, or the husband is disabled).
4. The household earns its living from low-income professions.

The headmaster of a school maintains the list of beneficiaries and provides monthly school attendance information to a School Managing Committee, whose members calculate the foodgrain requirement for the school for that month. The procurement request is certified and is then forwarded to local food officers and supply depots. Each school has a designated private grain dealer who receives the monthly supply of FFS foodgrains. Each student's parent or guardian picks up the ration from the dealer on a specified date of each month. Designated government officers supervise the grain distribution.

IFPRI'S EVALUATION OF FOOD FOR SCHOOLING

In September and October of 2000, IFPRI conducted a survey of a number of primary schools with and without the FFS program and collected information from FFS foodgrain dealers and program implementation officials. A cross section of households, including program beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries, were interviewed. IFPRI researchers used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the program. Their findings can be used to improve the program in Bangladesh and to provide guidance for the design of similar programs in other countries.

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- ***The study found that FFS has been successful in increasing primary school enrollment, promoting school attendance, and reducing dropout rates. The enrollment increase was greater for girls than for boys.***

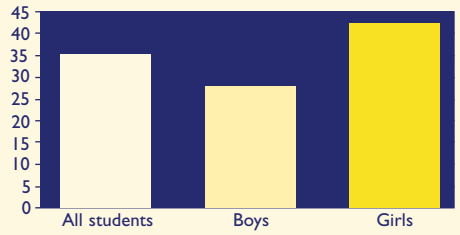
Student enrollment in FFS schools increased by 35 percent per school during the two-year period from the year before the start of the FFS program to the year after the introduction of the program. Enrollment of girls increased by a remarkable 44 percent. For boys, the increase was 28 percent. In contrast, enrollment in non-FFS schools increased by only 2.5 percent per school during the period.

The overall rate of school attendance is 70 percent in FFS schools and only 58 percent in non-FFS schools.

FFS encourages children to stay in school. About 40 percent of the students in FFS schools receive FFS foodgrain. From 1999 to 2000, only 6 percent of the FFS beneficiary students dropped out, compared with 15 percent of the students in FFS schools that did not receive benefits.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATE

PERCENT OF CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT IN FOOD FOR SCHOOLING SCHOOLS



- ***FFS schools are more crowded than non-FFS schools, but this does not necessarily affect the quality of education.***

Because of increased enrollment and class attendance rates, FFS school classrooms are more crowded than non-FFS classrooms. While there are 62 students per teacher in non-FFS schools, on average, FFS schools have 76 students per teacher.

As a part of IFPRI's survey, a standard achievement test was given to students in both FFS and non-FFS schools. The student achievement test scores, on average, were slightly lower in FFS schools. However, a further analysis reveals that a larger number of students per teacher does not result in lower test scores, implying that the overall lower quality of education in FFS schools cannot necessarily be attributed to the FFS program. Factors other than FFS seem to affect the quality of education.

- ***Targeting is generally effective, but it could be improved.***

Food for Schooling effectively targets poor households. House-holds receiving FFS benefits are poorer than nonbeneficiary households with children attending primary schools. However, considerable scope exists for improving targeting, as a sizeable number of poor households remain excluded from the program, even while many nonpoor households are included. The geographic targeting of villages for the FFS program appears to be quite good. The average income of households living in FFS villages is lower than the average income of households who live in non-FFS villages.

- ***FFS improves household food security.***

The IFPRI evaluation finds that the program significantly increases calorie and protein consumption in the beneficiary households, even after controlling for effects of income and other factors.

- ***FFS alone does not improve the nutritional status of vulnerable household members.***

Beyond improving calorie and protein intake, FFS does not significantly improve the nutritional status (as shown by anthropometric measurements) of preschool-age children and women, the most vulnerable members of the beneficiary households. These findings indicate that the increased access to food provided to households is necessary though not sufficient to eradicate malnutrition in the most vulnerable individuals.

- ***The current dealer-based system of FFS foodgrain distribution is problematic.***

There is evidence that FFS grain dealers often divert FFS foodgrains to the black market for extra profit. In the household survey, 71 percent of the FFS beneficiaries reported that the quantity of FFS foodgrains they actually received from dealers was less than the quantity they were entitled to receive.

FOOD FOR SCHOOLING RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Include complementary financial and technical assistance to improve the quality of education.***

In order to improve the quality of education in the FFS schools, it is important that the program design include the complementary financial and technical assistance to build more schools, improve school facilities, hire more and better qualified teachers, and provide proper training to teachers.

- ***Improve targeting of households and locations.***

The official targeting criteria used for the FFS program are excluding a considerable number of the poor while including some nonpoor. Hence, a more reliable means testing method should be developed to improve targeting. Effective targeting is particularly important if the number of schools and teachers cannot be increased immediately due to resource or administrative constraints. If this is the case, then more FFS program resources should be considered for those areas where low rates of enrollment are related to poverty and not lack of schools.

- ***Combine FFS with school feeding to achieve better results.***

FFS brings children to school, but it does not guarantee that their nutritional status will improve. Undernutrition reduces children's ability to concentrate and retain what they have learned at school. School feeding, especially a light snack early in the day, improves performance. In-school distribution of nutrient-dense wafers or other precooked foods avoids the costs of operating kitchen facilities at the schools and frees teachers from food management and preparation tasks. FFS and school-feeding programs, when combined, can be a powerful tool for reducing food shortages within households, creating opportunities for poor families to send children to school, keep them there, and increase learning.

- ***Broaden FFS to include a preschool feeding program.***

There is considerable evidence that preschool malnutrition is associated with delayed enrollment, poor health, and impaired cognitive development. Neither FFS nor school-feeding programs reaches children in the six-month to three-year-old age bracket, the critical time when solid foods are introduced and begin providing the lion's share of nutrition for growth. Hence, policymakers should consider preschool feeding programs as a key intervention for improving the cognitive abilities of children. Better-nourished preschool children will be better learners in primary school and beyond.

- ***Design an improved foodgrain distribution system.***

The FFS program can lower leakage by adopting an alternative distribution system that empowers beneficiaries and, at the same time, reduces inconvenience and transaction costs. It is recommended that all beneficiaries be required to convene at the local FFS school on a set day each month to collect their ration. This system would establish a sense of group solidarity among recipients, assisting them in clarifying the exact amount of rations to which they are entitled, and facilitating collective action against pilferage when it occurs.

REFERENCE

Akhter U. Ahmed and Carlo del Ninno. 2001. "Food for Education Program in Bangladesh: An Evaluation of its Impact on Educational Attainment and Food Security." International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC, USA.